Prior Learning Assessment by Portfolio Preparation Guide

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) began in adult degree programs over forty years ago in recognition that adult students who are either beginning or continuing their college degree often bring considerable knowledge and skills gained from years of work experience, referred to as experiential learning. PLA is a way to award academic credit for this experiential knowledge as it relates to specific course outcomes.

There are many types of prior learning assessment, which can include:

- College Level Exam Program (CLEP) standardized tests
- Challenge Exams developed by departments
- American Council on Education (ACE) pre-assessed credit
- ROTC/Military credit
- Advanced Placement (AP)/International Baccalaureate (IB)

What are the benefits of PLA?

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) is the national organization that promotes effective strategies for the academic success of adult learners. CAEL conducted a study of over 62,000 adult learners at 48 colleges and universities across the country and found that students who earned credit through PLA:

- Completed their degrees faster
- Were more likely to graduate
- Had higher GPA's

In addition, earning academic credit through PLA can significantly reduce the cost of a college education.

How much credit can be earned through PLA?

At the University of South Alabama, students can earn up to 30 hours of academic credit through multiple types of credit for prior learning. As always, students should work closely with their academic advisors in determining the most appropriate program of study.

What is PLA by Portfolio?

PLA by Portfolio is a process by which evidence of learning from outside the traditional academic classroom that matches the learning outcomes of a specific academic course, is gathered, organized, and presented for evaluation in the form of a detailed and comprehensive portfolio.

Such learning can be gained by:

- Work experience
- Continuing professional education and development
- Seminars and workshops
- In-service training
- Certifications and licenses
- Military Experience
- Non-credit courses such as MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses)
- Extensive reading, research, or independent study in a particular area
- Extensive volunteer experiences

What is PLA by Portfolio?

As previously stated, PLA by Portfolio is

….a formal communication, presented by the student to the college, as part of a petition requesting credit for learning outside the classroom. The portfolio must make its case clearly and succinctly, and it must provide sufficient supporting information and documentation so that faculty can use it as the basis for their evaluation (Lamdin, 1992, p. 84).

What subjects are assessed through PLA by Portfolio?

The subject areas assessed through the process are wide and vary at each university. At USA, each department determines whether they will award credit through this process, and if so, which courses are eligible. The PLA-P coordinator will review the initial application and determine if the course of interest is eligible for PLA by Portfolio credit.

How do I know if my learning is suitable for PLA by Portfolio?

Credit is awarded based on a match between the student's documented experiential learning and the stated outcomes of the identified course. The course description and syllabus can assist in determining whether it is a good fit. Reviewing the course text can also provide additional insight into the course content.

"Experience alone is not learning" (Snow, 2001, p. 3). That is why this process involves more than simply presenting a resume. In order for the learning gained through experience to be documented, evidence of progression in knowledge and skill must be presented. The portfolio should document increased advancement in activities, duties, job responsibilities, or positions. What lessons were learned through the experience, and how do those lessons relate to current best practice or theories in the field?

What does the final portfolio look like?

The final portfolio will consist of the following:

- Cover Sheet
- Table of Contents
- Target Statement
- Course syllabus
- PLA resume
- Personal essay / General learning narrative
- Course Learning Outcome 1
  - Learning narrative specific to the learning outcome of the course for which credit is sought.
  - List of supporting documentation
- Course Learning Outcome 2……
  - Learning narrative specific to the learning outcome of the course for which credit is sought.
  - List of supporting documentation
- Reflective essay
- Appendix of supporting documents
- References (if appropriate)

Process of Awarding Credit

How much credit may I be awarded through PLA by Portfolio?

USA allows for up to a total of 30 credit hours to be awarded through various forms of PLA including by portfolio. These hours can be awarded through one option, or a combination of several (CLEP, Military service, AP, PLA-P, etc.)

Each department, however, determines which courses and how many hours of credit will be allowed through PLA by Portfolio. This should be discussed with the PLA-P coordinator, academic advisor and department chair prior to beginning the process.

Who decides if credit is awarded?

Once the portfolio has been completed, it is reviewed by the PLA-P coordinator, who may suggest revisions or additions. When approved, it is sent to the appropriate department for evaluation. For example, if credit is being petitioned for BLY 320, the portfolio would be sent to the Biology Department for evaluation. The department determines the appropriate faculty member to evaluate the portfolio. It is typically the instructor of record for the course.

The faculty evaluator can request revisions, additional information or to meet with the student. There is no direct communication between the faculty evaluator and the student unless initiated by the faculty evaluator.

The faculty evaluator makes a recommendation to the department chair, who has the option of accepting the recommendation, revising, or rejecting the recommendation, or requesting more information. The decision of the chair for the awarded credit is then sent to the PLA-P coordinator for review with the student.

It is important to keep in mind that credit is not guaranteed. While this USA Online portfolio development site is designed to guide you in the development of a portfolio that documents experiential learning to the greatest extent possible, it is up to the faculty evaluator and department chair to determine if credit is awarded, and if so, how many credit hours.

If the requested credit is not awarded, is there an appeal process?

If the credit requested on the initial application is not awarded, the student can submit a letter of appeal to the PLA-P coordinator, along with any supporting information or documentation. This is then returned to the department for a second evaluation. The decision from the second evaluation is final.

PLA-P Semester Schedule

The process of portfolio evaluation and awarding of credit takes time. Final PLA Portfolios should be uploaded in USA Online by the end of the ***tenth week*** of the semester. ***Failure to submit the final portfolio by the tenth week of the semester may result in possible delay of PLA-P credit until the following semester.*** *PLA credit is not guaranteed.*

Because assembly of the portfolio is self-paced, students often wait till the last minute then don't have enough time to finish. Incompletes will be granted on a case by case basis.

The first few parts of the portfolio (target statement, PLA resume & personal essay) are fairly easy. The majority of the work will go into writing the critical learning events narratives and gathering supporting documentation. All parts of the PLA portfolio must be reviewed, approved and marked as complete by the PLA-P Coordinator.

This semester schedule will help keep you on track to finish your portfolio on time.

Week 1 – Target statement, syllabus and begin PLA resume

Week 2 –PLA resume and Personal essay

Week 3 – Critical learning events narratives 1 & 2 including list of supporting documents

- ***You should be thinking about and gathering supporting documents throughout the process of creating your PLA-P Portfolio.***

Week 4 – Critical learning events narratives 2 & 3 including list of supporting documents

Week 5 – Critical learning events narratives 3 & 4 including list of supporting documents

Week 6 – Final critical learning events narratives 4 & 5 including list of supporting documents

Week 7 – Reflective essay

Week 8 – Finalize all supporting documents

Week 9 – Assemble & submit first draft portfolio

Week 10 – Final corrections and submit final portfolio

Assignment 1: Target Statement

The target statement for your portfolio is a brief overview of your experiences and subsequent learning that you will be documenting in the portfolio, ending with the identification of the course for which you are applying for credit. This statement should be approximately 100 words.

Target Statement Example 1

Youth peer support and ADHD coaching have been central to my recent professional development. As a Youth Peer Support Specialist, I have worked with individuals ages 15 to 25 who have experienced significant mental health challenges, helping them build coping skills, strengthen executive functioning, and reengage with academic and personal goals. In my ADHD coaching work, I apply evidence-based psychological principles such as motivational interviewing, behavioral reinforcement, and executive function scaffolding to support habit formation, time management, and self-regulation.

Through this portfolio, I aim to demonstrate achievement of the PSY 395 Psychology Practicum learning outcomes by documenting applied psychological knowledge, ethical and client-centered practice, professional communication, and reflective growth gained through direct service experience.

Target Statement Example 2

Real estate has been the focus of my professional life since 2010, when I accepted my first position as a manager for a vacation condominium company. I quickly recognized this as my passion and obtained my real estate license and opened my own real estate office in 2015. Since that time, I have successfully built my business through buying and selling vacation properties on the Gulf Coast. I believe this portfolio will document the achievement of the course outcomes of RE 101 through my professional experience over the past 12 years.

Assignment 2: Course Syllabus

Upload the syllabus of the course for which you are applying for PLA-P credit.

Assignment 3: What is the PLA Resume?

You are probably very familiar with the traditional resume designed for employment. Just as the traditional resume shows your qualifications as a potential employee, the PLA resume highlights your qualifications for academic credit through the PLA by portfolio process. There are, however, some significant differences in the format and information provided.

The PLA resume will address the learning objectives of the course being sought and the specific knowledge and skills you have gained through your experience that are relevant to the course for which you are applying for PLA credit. Sources of experiential learning can include jobs, job training, professional development, military service, certificates or licenses, community involvement or volunteerism.

As one of the first documents the evaluator sees, it is very important that the PLA resume be detailed yet concise and well-organized. The content must clearly relate to the learning outcomes of the academic course identified on the course syllabus. The experiences should be presented in chronological order and linked to the specific outcomes of the course.

Here are two examples of PLA Resumes:

Name: Sarah Student
Major: Psychology

Expected Date of Graduation: May 2026

Course for PLA Credit: PSY 395

Course Title: Psychology Practicum

COURSE LEARNING OUTCOME	SOURCE OF LEARNING	ACTIVITIES/KNOWLEDGE DEMONSTRATED	DATES
1. Employ psychological principles in an applied setting	Youth Peer Support Specialist - TrueCare Health ADHD Coach Training through ADCT	Applied motivational interviewing (MI) and reflective listening to elicit client-driven goals and build intrinsic motivation. In ADHD coaching, used MI to help clients identify barriers to executive functioning and develop self-directed strategies for time management and habit formation. In peer support, employed reflective listening to validate lived experience, build therapeutic rapport, and empower youth to identify their own strengths and coping strategies.	Aug. 2025 – Present (Coaching) Dec. 2024 – Present (Peer Support)
2. Improve and expand the use of psychological principles based on supervisor feedback	Youth Peer Support Specialist - TrueCare Health ADHD Coach Training through ADCT	Participated in weekly staffing meetings in the peer support role, receiving structured supervisory feedback on client interactions and adjusting approaches accordingly. During ADHD coach training, completed four recorded coaching sessions that were reviewed and scored by a certified coach; used detailed written feedback from each scored session to refine MI technique, questioning style, and goal-setting structure.	Dec. 2024 – Present (Peer Support) Aug. – Dec. 2025 (Coaching)
3. Gain experience interacting with individuals facing challenges	Youth Peer Support Specialist - TrueCare Health	Worked directly with two distinct high-need populations: (1) children and adolescents diagnosed with Serious Emotional Disturbance (SED), supporting emotional regulation, coping skill development, and engagement with treatment goals; and (2) young adults ages 15–25 enrolled in a First-Episode Psychosis (FEP) program, the majority of whom carried diagnoses of bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Provided trauma-informed, person-centered support across both populations, navigating complex symptom presentations and coordinating with clinical staff.	Dec. 2024 – Present
4. Reflect on experiences to expand self-understanding	Ongoing Professional Practice	Maintain a consistent reflective practice through daily journaling and meditation, using both to process client interactions, recognize personal reactions, and monitor professional growth. Actively seek feedback from supervisors, fellow peer supports, and coaching peers. Supplement direct experience with ongoing self-directed learning including books, peer-reviewed journals, professional videos, and continuing education courses, ensuring practice remains grounded in current theory and evidence.	Dec. 2024 – Present

Selected Accomplishments

- Worked with 50+ patients and coaching clients across peer support and ADHD coaching roles.
- Completed National Board Certified Health and Wellness Coaching (NBC-HWC) training through HGI, December 2025.
- Received Alabama Certified Peer Specialist Youth (CPS-Y) certification, May 2025.
- Created original psycho-education videos on mental health topics that were adopted as educational materials at TrueCare Health Systems.
- Completed the Connections course through Joe Hudson's Art of Accomplishment, learning to cultivate a state of VIEW — Vulnerability, Impartiality, Empathy, and Wonder — which is now integrated into all coaching and peer support sessions to foster authentic co

Name: Elizabeth Cole
Major: Interdisciplinary Studies
Academic Course for PLA Credit: RE 101

Expected Date of Graduation: Fall 2023
Department: Integrative Studies
Department: Real Estate Management

COURSE OUTCOME	SOURCE OF LEARNING	ACTIVITIES	DATES
1. Define basic real estate terminology	Real Estate Agent, Cole Real Estate Licensed in Alabama and Florida	Sell residential real estate	2015 – Present
2. Examine the principles of property management	Manager, Beachfront Condominiums Pensacola, Florida	Managed vacation condominium rentals	2010 – 2015
3. Apply the steps in mortgage loan brokering	Real Estate Investor	Buy and sell residential vacation properties	2012-Present
4. Identify and explain real estate law	Advanced Training Certificate in Real Estate Law (appended)	Completion of intensive 40-hour training course	2018
5. Apply the standards of appraisal practice	Real Estate Investor	Appraise properties for potential investment	2012 – Present

Selected Accomplishments

- Sold over $5 million in real estate in the first year of starting my own real estate company.
- Voted Realtor of the Year by the Pensacola Realtor's Association, 2020.
- Gave professional presentations on property management, appraisals and brokering at Florida Realtor's Association, 2020, 2021 and 2022.

Assignment 3: PLA Resume

Remember - as one of the first document the evaluator sees, it is very important that the PLA resume be ***detailed yet concise and well-organized***. The content must clearly relate to the learning outcomes of the academic course identified on the course syllabus. The experiences should be presented in chronological order and linked to the specific outcomes of the course.

At the top of the PLA resume include:

- Name
- Expected graduation date
- Major
- Course for which PLA credit is being sought
- Course title

The PLA resume should include professional and/or volunteer experience, with a **focus on that which is related to the course objectives**.

Resume should include:

- Course learning outcome (found in the course syllabus)
- Source(s) of learning
- Activities that demonstrate the learning outcome
- Dates

Related to each course outcome you can include:

- Employment history and specific learning activities
- Specialized training (certifications, training, licenses, etc.)
- Life experiences (employment, military service, volunteer experience, practical experience, etc.)

You can also include a section for Selected Accomplishments to highlight anything that supports your learning and experience.

Below are two Word Document templates you can use to help format your PLA Resume:

It is not mandatory to use these templates. They are just provided as an aid.

You can add or remove rows to suit the number of learning objectives included in the course.

Final PLA resume should be converted to and uploaded as a PDF file.

Name: **Expected Date of Graduation:**

Major:

Course for PLA Credit: **Course Title:**

Course Learning Outcome	Source of Learning	Activities	Dates

Selected Accomplishments

-

Name: **Expected Date of Graduation:**

Major:

Course for PLA Credit: **Course Title:**

Course Learning Outcome	Source of Learning	Activities	Dates

Selected Accomplishments

-

Assignment 4: Personal Essay

The personal essay is designed to give the evaluator a wholistic picture of who you are and plan to become - educationally and professionally. The essay should be two to four pages, double spaced and include:

- Current educational and/or employment status that can include degrees held/sought, current employment (if employed), volunteer activities, licenses/certifications/training.
- Long-term educational and professional goals
- Description of what is needed to achieve these goals and your plan for achievement
- Narrative to present a picture of yourself and your learning development

Assignment 5, Part 1: Critical Learning Events Narrative Course Learning Outcome 1

The **Critical Learning Events Narratives** are detailed summaries of your experiences and how those experiences contributed to the achievement of each of the learning outcomes in the course for which you are seeking credit. This is your opportunity to present ***clear evidence*** that your learning outside the classroom meets the course learning objectives. The narrative should be two to four pages, double spaced.

These narratives will be a bit different from student papers you may have written in the past. They should be written in first person (I, me, my). It is a persuasive document, meant to convince the faculty evaluator that you have met the learning objectives of the course.

A narrative will be written for each course learning objective and include:

- Identification of the **course outcome**, bold and center-justified.
- A **detailed description of your experiences** as they relate to the course objective (dates, activities/responsibilities). Include challenges that you faced and learned from, as well as success.
- A detailed description of the learning that took place as a result of these experiences, specific to the course objective.
- Citations in the text of the narrative that link the experience/learning with theory and academic sources. Citations should be in APA format.
- A reference list that includes the reference for each of the citations in the text. References should be in APA format, beginning with the header **References** in bold, center-justified

Keep in mind that for each Critical Learning Events Narrative, you will need to provide supporting documentation.

Assignment 5, Part 2: List of Supporting Documents Course Learning Outcome 1

Supporting documentation is the evidence you will provide for having met each course learning objective. This documentation is critical for the substantiation of your learning.

What are potential sources of supporting documentation?

Experiential learning must be verified by providing supporting documentation. The greatest sources of such documentation can include verification from:

- Employers, managers and supervisors
- Clients
- Colleagues from other companies
- Professional development trainers
- Those connected to community activities or self-employment

Information from these individuals can be requested through a letter of solicitation. This is not a letter of reference or job verification, but a letter that confirms specifically what is written in the learning narratives, including duties, responsibilities, projects, accomplishments, and indications of professional growth and learning.

Other sources of verification of learning include:

- Performance reviews that address the learning relevant to the course
- Reports, letters or other documents
- Media
- Forms, graphics or databases created
- Licensures or certificates, including the requirements
- Training evaluations

Any questions regarding appropriate documentation should be discussed with the PLA-P coordinator.

Create a list of the supporting documents you will provide for this learning outcome. Put the learning outcome at the top of the page, bold, center-justified. Then list each item you will be appending at the back of your portfolio.

Assignment 5, Part 3: Supporting Documents Course Learning Outcome 1

Supporting documentation is the evidence you provide for having met each course learning outcome. This documentation is critical for the substantiation of your learning.

Each supporting document should be submitted with a header that says Appendix A (B...) on the left and learning objective number on the right side of the header, so that the link between the supporting document and associated course objective is clear.

All supporting documents should be submitted as PDF files to preserve the material format.

** The faculty evaluator may request additional documentation.*

Course Learning Outcome 2, 3, 4…

For each course learning outcome include:

- Critical learning events narrative
- List of supporting documents
- Supporting documents

Assignment 6: Reflective Essay

The final component of your portfolio is the reflective essay. This document should be 750 to 1000 words and summarize the information presented in the previous sections. It should be engaging, well-organized and highlight the learning you have gained through your lived experiences as they relate to the learning objectives of the course being sought. This is your last opportunity to convince the faculty evaluator that you have met the learning objectives of the course being sought through your previous experiential learning.

Final Portfolio

You have now carefully developed all of the required components of your PLA portfolio. It is time to put each of the sections in a single document for submission and review. The portfolio will first be reviewed by the PLA-P coordinator, who may suggest or request revisions prior to submission for faculty evaluation.

Final Portfolio should include:

- Cover Sheet
- Table of Contents
- Target Statement
- Course syllabus
- PLA resume
- Personal essay / General learning narrative
- Course Learning Outcome 1
  - Learning narrative specific to the learning outcome of the course for which credit is sought.
  - List of supporting documentation
- Course Learning Outcome 2……
  - Learning narrative specific to the learning outcome of the course for which credit is sought.
  - List of supporting documentation
- Reflective essay
- Appendix of supporting documents
- References (if appropriate)